

## FROM AUTHENTICITY TO HYBRIDITY: A PERSONAL JOURNEY

Radhika Coomaraswamy

**W**hen Mr. Godfrey Gunathilleke, my former boss and the only man who was willing to offer me employment when I returned as a student from the United States in the late seventies, called and asked me to speak at the Gratiaen Award ceremony, I was honored and accepted excitedly. Within hours I had entered a state of panic. What do I, a mere lawyer and an academic one at that, have to contribute to the world of literary criticism? Anyway, I had given my word and in the best feminist tradition, I thought I would take the opportunity to pontificate on my ideas and experiences in my limited engagement with English Literature.

### Law and Literature

**I**t is not that the law and literature are that much apart. There is a well known two volume work edited by Ephraim London. The first volume is called "The Law in Literature" and the second volume is called "The Law as Literature". Some of the greatest scenes in world literature have involved the law. Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment and the famous encounter in Ivan's narrative between Jesus like Outsider and The Grand Inquisitor in The Brothers Karamazov illustrate the power of law and legal thinking in every day life as well as Machiavellian philosophy. Dickens was another writer who portrayed the process of law in his writings. The trial of Bardell in the Pickwick Papers and "In Chancery" from Bleak House are some examples.

On the other hand, some of the best writings in English have also been Court judgements whether they be the judgements of Lord Denning or those of Oliver Wendell Holmes. For example, the words of Justice Brandeis in a famous case called *Whitney v. Houston* may have relevance for us even today. He said, "Those who won our independence believed that the final end of the State was to make men free to develop their faculties.... They believed that freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think are means indispensable to the discovery and spread of political truth". Finally, let us not forget that some of the famous words we remember are those pronounced by great men and women from the dock before judges who were about to pass sentence on them. From Joan of Arc, Mahatma Gandhi to Fidel Castro, the famous "history will absolve me" speeches have inspired legions to fight for causes that they believed in.

There is another more recent connection between law and literature. It relates to the methodology of critical analysis. In the seventies and the eighties, the school of deconstruction was a prominent school of literary analysis in western universities. Later post-

structuralists and post-modernists further developed what may be termed "discourse analysis" the analysis of words and their genealogy in a particular context or tradition. These movements began in the literary field but were soon to influence developments in other areas. The Critical Legal Studies Movement in western universities in the seventies and eighties were deeply influenced by the trends in literary criticism. They believed that instead of looking at law in terms of ideal principles and rational policy, we should deconstruct the law to reveal the power relations inherent in any particular judgement. We should not let legal language obfuscate the political decisions being made by the legislature and the judiciary. Some of the most brilliant constitutional scholars of South Asia like Professor Uppendra Baxi were deeply influenced by these schools of literary criticism and their subsequent development into the critical legal studies movement.

### A Personal Journey

**N**ow that I have justified the reason why someone trained in the law may have the audacity to speak at so august a literary forum as the Gratiaen Awards, let me move on to share with you my limited but personal journey in the field of South Asian literature. I am not a critic of English literature. I am only a consumer. I am not well versed in literary studies or literary theory. Since my interest does not require that I master the subject and read everything of relevance, I am therefore selective and arbitrary in the way I choose which books to read. I am selective in that I find over time that I limit most of my reading to South Asian and Third World writers writing in English. I don't know how and when this happened but I find that in recent times I have limited my readings by what appears to be misplaced post-colonial sentiments. It may also be a question of time and the need to allocate it efficiently. I am arbitrary in that I choose books which I feel will either enhance my aesthetic experience or which will reflect in literary terms my political and cultural world view of the moment. I find that my journey in literature also parallels my life and that it interacts with, interprets and engages the world in a manner that resonates with my own personal experience. There is a dialectic in motion between your life and the literature you read but that dialectic is still within the parameters of your world view and the expectations of the moment.

### Authenticity

**L**et me be more specific. Like most of my generation, I began my journey in the world of Sri Lankan literature and

culture with a desire to discover the authentic, Sri Lankan experience. In retrospect there may have not been anything more unauthentic than a Tamil girl living in New York City searching for the authentic experience of the Sinhala village, the Buddhist temple and the village tank. And, that was the case. I devoured the works of Martin Wickremesinghe, and I read what I could of Sinhala literature in translation. When I was in Sri Lanka, I would not miss any of Sarathchandra's plays, I loved to watch Vajira and Chitrasena and I think I have seen all of Lester James Pieries' films in Sri Lanka and sometimes at film festivals in New York.

At this time I was a student in the United States during the Vietnam war era of rebellion. My search for the authentic Sri Lankan experience was matched by the desire to discover parallels in other authentic South Asian and third experience. Increasingly I realize that to be a minority in a slam country is an oppressive affair. That is why I loved New York in the 70s. You could get lost in a South Asian Identity or a third world identity. There the "other" was the west. You could wear Mexican skirts, Indian tops and African jewellery and still have a sense that you belonged to the hot, coloured races of the world. It was an expansive identity with so many diverse experiences from which to mix and match and to assert your individuality. Identity was a creative act, not an act of exclusion. I could be a Hindu and a Buddhist at the same time, take pride in Anuradhapura as well as Nallur. I claimed the Taj Mahal as my own and Moghul art and Subbhulakshmi's lyrical music. And so the parallels in literature. The readings were preordained, Chinua Achebe, R.K. Narayan, Kamala Markandeya, A.K. Ramunujan, Raja Rao Mulk Raj Anand and at a later date, Vikram Seth's *Suitable Boy*. This authentic era was a voyage of discovery, a celebration of the suppressed cultures of Asia and Africa. It was an era of self-congratulation, verging on the self-righteous. It was an optimistic time when we reconstructed ourselves as third world beings in touch with our roots.

Younger scholars tell us these days that we were all suffering from delusion. They insist that there was never such a thing as an authentic culture. They claim that all those great works of art and literature of the 60's and 70's were all reinventions and reconstructions in a particular mode that were as influenced by the colonial past as they were by indigenous roots. They are probably right. Their meticulous scholarship seems to point in that direction. But those were happy, creative days where the future of the third world and Sri Lanka in particular seemed full of possibility. The literature reflected that innocence and a belief that we would find our way if we would just follow our roots. As usual politics paralleled literature. It was the era of the post-colonial state, the heyday of non-alignment and the economic policy of import substitution guided our tastes. We were convinced that we were experiencing the authentic revival. National sovereignty and third world solidarity were all we needed.

## Universal Human Rights

1983 changed all that at least for me. Lakdasa Wickremesinghe may have said that it was 1971 that was the turning point but in all honesty for me it was 1983 that was the year of rupture. What is the point of national sovereignty if states can let the most horrendous

things happen to their citizens? As I watched most of my family go into Diaspora, I felt anger at the brutality that was not condemned at the highest levels of government. The civil war, the ruthlessness of the LTTE and the brutal confrontation with the JVP in the late 1980s made it clear to me that the search for authenticity was not enough. Without universal human rights, authentic culture has very little meaning.

As usual my taste in literature paralleled my disillusionment. In Sri Lanka, I found the poetry of Anne Ranasinghe comforting and relevant. But except for Rajiva Wijesinha, Jean Arasanayagam and Ernest McIntyre writing in Australia, there was very little English writing in the Sri Lanka of 1980s which came to terms with the horror we were facing in the most violent decade of our history. I found solace in angry writers outside Sri Lanka. V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie seemed to have the appropriate contempt for the elites who ran third world countries. Latin American writers in the style of Marquez and African authors such as Soyinka and Ngugi also seemed to move beyond the idyllic images of the gentle phase of post colonial literature.

These writers pointed out the evil, the grotesque and the farce that govern our lives. They highlighted the criminality of politics, the arbitrariness of political power, the misuse of culture and the self-righteous pretensions of nationalist elites. They also pointed to the vulnerability of law and order and a people at the mercy of bureaucratic officials in league with mobsters and businessmen. They were at their best when they challenged cultural chauvinists, whether they be Hindu nationalists or Islamic fundamentalists, exposing their hypocrisy, inhumanity and narrow mindedness. They had no sympathy for their culture of exclusion. Though I accepted the fact that someone like Naipaul caricatured our societies, I did not care. I liked his ruthless, forthright judgement, his shock treatment to move us away from our complacency. Those were angry days and made more angry by the fact that I felt Sri Lankan writers except for a handful did not want to seize the time and write the condemnation I was looking for. Rajiva Wijesinha's novels tried but they concentrated on our political elites. The societal convulsions, the apocalyptic nature of the violence that was pervading our society and the values that were being cultivated were not addressed in most of the writing of the period. We had to wait a decade before they were to finally emerge in the writings of Sri Lankan authors.

## Hybridity

Like Pattini before shepherdesses, my anger has cooled, perhaps it has turned to despair. In these terrible times, I find solace in what I feel is the emerging Golden Age of South Asian writing in English. The extremists in our society, Sinhala nationalists on the one hand, the LTTE on the other as well as certain Muslim groupings have what Dharini Rajasingham has called a culture of ethnic enclaves. Though there must be a recognition of ethnic self-determination in any democracy, the creation of monolithic ethnic spaces may also limit social expression and human freedom. It is important to struggle against the exclusivity and the parochialism of those spaces by recapturing the enduring ways of ethnic interaction in trade, social interface and everyday life.

The writings of a new wave of South Asian writers is therefore welcome. They seem to embody the spirit of multiculturalism and seem to celebrate hybridity as an inevitable part of human freedom. Like many others who have given up master narratives, I no longer search for the one authentic culture but enjoy the multiple lifestyles and the diverse stories of the different communities scattered throughout South Asia. Carl Muller's writing on the Burghers, Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*, Mistry's and Sidhwa's novels on the Parsees, Shyam Selvadurai on the Sri Lankan Tamils etc... are all examples of this new richness. The texture and tapestry of our South Asian heritage, what Naipaul once called a "Million Mutinies" seem particularly important to highlight in this context of our lives. The importance of diversity in everyday life, the variety of human lifestyles and social expression captured in the writing of these authors with nostalgia and humour defies the reality of ethnic monoliths. These authors make no excuses for not being representative. They are telling you the story of a new approach to authenticity, the authenticity of localism and every day life.

The other aspect of this new wave of writing is the breaking of South Asian Taboos without apology. Arundhati Roy writes openly about breaking the love taboos, of crossing caste and class barriers if not the primary taboo of incest. Rohinton Mistry in *The Fine Balance* also challenges class and caste boundaries and Shyam Selvadurai in *Funny Boy* breaks the homophobic silence. Regi Siriwardena's *The Lost Lenore* openly defends hybridity as a societal ideal. Taboos are also broken in diasporic South Asian communities where these barriers melt away in the face of day to day living. The destruction of these barriers allows one to extend the limits of human possibility and human interaction. In South Asia where social structure has been sanctified around these taboos, the destruction of these rules and practices is an enormous leap forward within the cultural context. They challenge the organizational centre of the society and

therefore its construction of essences. Those who challenge these taboos do so with a great deal of courage. South Asian literature has begun to reflect this courage in important ways. More and more writers put forward the ideal of hybridity, not in the security of melting pot, immigrant societies where such mixing is inevitable but like Arundhati Roy they do so within the confines of a traditional society which as she often says "lives in several centuries simultaneously". They place a fist in the face of tradition while being deeply immersed in it at the same time. That is the new authenticity, the authenticity of defiance from within.

Finally, you must be saying, amazing, why has she not said anything about gender. Well with the likes of Neloufer de Mel, Neluka de Silva, Manique Gunasekere, Maithree Wickremesinghe, among others, gender in Sri Lankan literary criticism is well taken care of and there is nothing I need to add to their contributions.

I would just like to conclude by saying that Mr. Prakash, the Indian Deputy high Commissioner in a recent article commemorating 50 years of Sri Lankan literature in English, highlighted the fact that many of our novels take place in the light of nostalgia. Many of the books look back at a past reality with sensitivity and sometimes, as with Carl Muller, in good humour. This nostalgic mode pervades all of Romesh Gunasekere's work, Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* and even Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*. No-one has looked at or tried to imagine the future. As we "claw ourselves to death" in Naipaul's words about Uruguay, the bleakness of the present and terror about the future has stifled our creativity. NO-one even dares to reflect on our lives in the next century. We wait for the day when a great Sri Lankan writer imagines a future where we Sri Lankans live in peace and civility. Such an act of hope will surely deserve The Gratiaen Award.



*Pravada* reminds its readers  
that renewal of subscriptions  
is due  
following issue Vol. 5 No. 8

Cheques should be mailed to:  
*Pravada* Publications  
425/15, Thimbirigasyaya Road,  
Colombo 5  
Sri Lanka.